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**MGT Stage**



Theatre review

**CATS**

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PHOTOS BY RAUL DA SILVA



Sometimes it pays for a cat to be an underdog. While cat photos rule the internet (aside from porn), *Cats* the musical has a reputation of being past its due date and suffers from having the composer Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber now being most familiar as a theatrical insider punchline. One certainly wouldn't know it from the energetic and moving production now at the Panasonic.

If cats have nine lives, this cat is certainly enjoying a thriving incarnation. The plot is still new-agey nonsense with twee British references (could *Cats* be the first jukebox musical despite the original music?) but when Ma-Anne Dionisio rips into "Memory" (one of the truly great 11 o'clock numbers) the thrill is there, the hairs stand up on the back of one's neck and one tears up. And when the stage floods with feline dancers who are so eager to please and so dazzlingly talented, the audience is swept along. The production is set in a junkyard but everything gleams under the carefully applied dust and dirt. Sequins are using subtly (an oxymoron for sure, but it really does work) to add a sparkle and sheen that teases and catches the eyes.



It is a remarkable cast: a hard-driving ensemble that clicks like clockwork but with individualistic cat-mannerism accents, who shine as leads when they get their moment in the spotlight. **Martin Samuel** is a sexy strutting rock star Rum Tum Tugger who is "always on the wrong side of the door"; Michael Donald and Neesa Kenemy are the adorable mischievous kittens Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer and elicit the same reaction that those destructive but irresistible critters do; Shimbleshanks the railway cat, the deservedly self-satisfied grandstanding Jay T Schramek, makes the most of this technologically clever production's second biggest "wow" moment before tucking it under his arm and dancing off with it; and Devon Tullock as the magical Mr Mistoffelees is truly magical with spectacular leaps, bounds and pirouettes, all while grinning a Cheshire smile.

The usually murky sound of the Panasonic has been tamed and every note is crystal clear which suits the strong voices. Many of the songs are third person descriptions of cat tics and habits and while cat owners will nod in satisfied agreement - or shake their heads with rueful hilarity - it is a lot to ask of a performer to stand and declaim. Fortunately the voices are more than up to it and on occasion - Gus the theatre cat, an extraordinarily versatile Cory O'Brien, is brutally touching until the number descends into a music hall parody courtesy of Webber's erratic score - they sell the poetry with panache. And when the music can't be salvaged there is so much eye candy that the ear is distracted.



It is truly fitting that this production of a show that at its core about redemption and second chances takes a trailblazing-in-its-time, now a disregarded classic, and with clever style, a ton of polish, pizzazz and sweat, gives it a new life for a new age. Anyone who hasn't seen *Cats* will be delighted, anyone who has will be happily surprised.



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**Cats continues until at least Sun, July 28 at the Panasonic Theatre, 651 Yonge St.**  
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